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A PICTURE OF RUSSIA

BY PRINCESS CANTACUZÉNE-SPERANSKY

WHEN I went to Russia I found the inhabitants of the villages I visited, a simple childish crowd, working only when they must, always in debt to the village usurer, singing or sleeping in their spare hours, drinking when they owned money or could borrow it, and leading a life which intellectually was starved, but which nevertheless had its picturesque and artistic sides, and its advantages of great space and good air and the beautiful frames of forests and the fields, which went to inspire the song and the legend of Russia generation after generation. On this primitive base was built up a structure of great brilliancy and a culture as advanced as that of any other part of Europe, for the Russian was talented beyond all other people and he absorbed and digested any intellectual nourishment within his reach.

Strangely enough, between the aristocrat and the peasant living near him, there existed a free masonry of patriarchal relations, making our country life ultra-democratic. These two classes were left out in the scheme of government, which consisted of an autocratic sovereign with a bureaucracy, which made the machine of administration. The nobility might shine at court, but they had no particular influence in politics—and the peasant might do the work of the nation, but he was the last element that was thought of by those above. So the two often drew near to one another, and felt a mutual trust which made for protection on one side, and faithful service on the other. Living off by themselves through many months of the year, far from the bustle and traffic of great cities, they grew to understand and help one another in many ways. I noticed, for instance, in our village that the doctor sent by the Government was not believed in by the people, who were afraid

of him, yet they would take any medicine or go to any doctor who was ours—and for many years we kept a house doctor in the chateau to whom our people flocked with all their troubles. Meantime the man furnished by the Government to look after them led a lonesome life.

It was the same about schools. Those set up by the Government under the Ministry of Education were avoided by the people when possible—while any schools founded and carried on by proprietors' efforts and under proprietors' eyes were enthusiastically attended.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the favorite methods of developing Russia had been by the importation of so-called colonists. These groups of foreigners, some French but many more German, were brought into the country and established over its surface in villages or districts which were given them as their own. Here they always lived as they had in their home countries, intermarrying, speaking their old language and keeping their national ideals. Germans especially made the neighborhoods in which they settled, feel the heavy hand of their domination. Usually these colonists were disliked intensely by the peasantry around them.

When war with Japan came in 1904 and mobilization occurred among our villages, I was surprised to see the lack of interest shown by soldiers who were going away to fight. Apparently they knew nothing about where they were going, nothing of the Japanese whom they were to fight, nothing of the reason for the war. Yet all of them went at the first call, arguing simply that it was for the "Little Father" that they were being dragged away. It seemed a touching tribute to the one ideal which had been kept before them, that they so willingly gave their lives for it, though with such vague understanding of the cause.

In 1914 it was different. We knew the Germans, and had felt their heavy hand on many occasions. Superintendents of estates were often Germans. Many of the bureaucrats were of the same extraction, and all along the frontiers our peasantry had had endless difficulty with their neighbors. This was everybody's war, and everybody was keen to get the better of a foe who through long centuries had been the oppressor. From the beginning, however, there were German spies and German propaganda at work. At the moment war was being discussed there was a strike in

St. Petersburg among the workmen. It was found, when soldiers went to quell the riots there, that many of those who were in the uprising had German gold in their hands or in their pockets. After this trouble was quieted and the war began, German spies were at work everywhere. It was known that they were on our frontiers, back of the firing lines, all through the provinces. Even at Court and in the Government they had their workers. The Minister of War was proved without doubt to have been one of their tools, and he had held up through their machinations the production of ammunition and the arms which were so vitally needed to keep our army going through 1915. On account of his not living up to his promise, the great retreat of 1915 occurred, when the Russian armies after their brilliant offensive at the beginning of the war were driven back step by step defending their home-land with empty hands and bare breasts. No chapter in Russian history has shown to such advantage the character of the Russian soldier and the Russian nation at large. Their devotion to duty, their magnificent courage, their faith in their commander and in Providence, held our armies in stiff lines against the enemy's fire.

The old Grand Duke, Commander in Chief, said himself at this time that if Soukhomlinoff was not summarily punished for his treachery, any propagandists of revolution might well find fertile ground for their preachings, since the people realized the criminal responsible for all their misery and butchery had gone unpunished because of the protection this man received from his clique at court, the Germanophile Occult party.

After the retreat events developed rapidly. The old Grand Duke and most of the Liberals at court were sent away in disgrace, and a sharp struggle with the Liberals in the Duma ended by the Emperor closing the Parliament itself. The guidance of affairs more and more passed into the hands of the Rasputin party. These people worked only for their own aggrandizement and to seize the power. Things went from bad to worse in the Government, while along the firing line and through the country with desperate courage our men fought and our women worked, to keep their contract with the Allies and to push the enemy back to his boundaries again. As the weeks progressed and the revolutionary propaganda augmented, one heard murmur-

ings on every side against the powers which were directing events, until one felt at last in the early part of 1917 that a terrible crisis was approaching with rapid strides. The group in the Government, those at least who were against a liberal solution of our troubles, were blind and deaf to the signs of the times. They were moving with ever-increasing speed towards the precipice which meant the dynasty's downfall. When the revolution occurred in March, 1917, it came as a surprise, however, to all the better Liberals both in the Parliament and in the Army, who had hoped to hold over the breaking up of the machinery of government until the end of the war. There were signs that Germany was suffering from economic troubles, which might injure the morale of her armies, and besides that the few Liberals left in the Government had finally managed with enormous difficulty, to gather supplies of arms and munitions for a strong offensive, which was, they hoped, to bring a final victory to Allied arms. Of late, all the best of Russia had been looking forward to a constitutional government soon; but there was no ill-will towards the sovereign himself and we expected the movement to be purely a palace revolution, which would establish a constitution and a responsible ministry.

The actual crisis was brought on by the folly and blindness of Protopopoff and the Empress, and the confidence of the Emperor in their judgment. At their instigation in a critical moment, the Duma was closed arbitrarily and unexpectedly, and this act was the signal for an uprising which in a few days overthrew the dynasty, obtained the Emperor's abdication and created chaos in the capital. The people possessed of the ideals which always have characterized them, believed implicitly that the millennium had come. The streets were filled for a few days with disorderly crowds, and then as excitement simmered down, by dignified, touching processions, singing hymns and marching with banners from church to church, bowing before their Ikons and thanking Providence for the liberty which was so new. In the Duma at the moment of the Government's upsetting, a few strong men had saved the situation, and had created the provisional Government. They had ideals which they still lived up to, wishing to hold to their contract with the Allies and to keep the machinery of administration and of the armies working to the end.

There was another organization, however, which no one suspected or thought of in the general excitement, and which had plans of its own. At Stockholm, were the headquarters of the German spy propaganda for Russia established during the war, and from their post of observation the lying German spies who had been watching events, prepared at once to take hold of the Russian situation. One of the first things which happened at the moment of revolution was the suppression of the police all over Russia, since in the people's eyes the police represented all that was worst of our bureaucracy. This suppression meant that frontiers were left open, until after six long days it was realized the enemy was profiting by the situation to send in thousands of spies, propagandists and organizers, who were to do the work of the enemy inside our lines and over our whole country. When this was realized, troops were immediately sent to the frontiers, and passport regulations were again put in force—but the harm had been done and from then on Russia was honeycombed with enemy's agents, who were doing their work systematically in every group where they felt people to be ignorant enough to listen to their tempting theories.

The first I heard of this action was from an officer, a comrade of my husband, whom we knew well, and who chanced to be in Petrograd on leave at the time of the first revolutionary uprising, March, 1917. He with several others rushed to the Duma to volunteer their services to Goutchkoff, the provisionally named War Minister. The first duty given this officer was to take some orders to the press for printing. He told me that he had been the rounds of the typographical bureaus, where he had expected to find no one, knowing that the city's workmen would be all in the streets celebrating the new era of freedom. To his surprise he found all the establishments he visited running at full speed, occupied by busy people, who refused to take the job he offered, because they were occupied printing the "Order No. 1" to the soldiers, and sending it rapidly to the front by special messengers. There the sheets were delivered to the soldiers, instead of the staffs, thus destroying discipline. Propaganda was also being printed, and these groups of printers were in charge of foremen who spoke to their subordinates in German. Captain K—— discovered also that the workmen themselves were mainly foreigners,

entirely uninterested in the celebrations going on around them, but ready to work overtime. This seemed symptomatic, in view of the well known enthusiasm of the Russian lower class to celebrate a holiday on the slightest excuse. For some time, however, the results of the enemy propaganda in the revolution were not visible, to the average observer, and no demonstrations on the part of propagandists occurred until six or eight weeks after the overthrow of the Imperial Government. I was in Petrograd shortly after the revolution's first upheaval. I had been lunching out one day. Afterwards, when driving home through the streets of the capital to my hotel, I observed to my companion how extraordinarily quiet and well behaved our people were in spite of the entire lack of police. We said to one another that no nation in the world could have stood such a sudden transition with such dignity and idealism, and made good to the same extent. That very afternoon a number of people came in to tea with me, and told how they had passed a procession going down the Nevsky which they felt to have been faked, composed of ragged, slipshod workmen and soldiers, marching in the city's main street carrying black banners on which the mottoes said among other things, "Down with capitalism and the Government!" The passersby had looked on with surprise and interest, but had not joined in, and after its failure to arouse the public, the procession had dissolved and scattered, and the movement for active anarchy was given up for some little time. Then Lenine and Trotzky and other preachers of the new doctrine, were brought into Russia from outside and scattered over the country, preaching what was called "Bolshevism." At first they had small success but soon curiosity brought the passing crowd to a standstill below the summer house perched on the garden wall of the Ksesiensky palace. There, orators of the new persuasion were kept talking from early morning until late at night, and from there propaganda sheets were scattered to the crowd. Nobody as yet felt this doctrine to be a serious danger to the country, and in view of the new rights of free speech no effort was made to suppress the growing strength of this group of German propagandists who were to upset law and order.

In July a second uprising occurred, and at that time General Polovtsoff, Commandant of Petrograd, with the courage which characterized him always, on his own responsi-

bility arrested twenty-three ringleaders of the Bolsheviki movement. Most of them were aliens. General Polovtsoff had the criminals' headquarters raided. There he found in their coffers German gold, used for paying their agents in Russia or for bribing their victims. Considering that this was sufficient evidence of their enemy origin, General Polovtsoff hoped to see them tried and executed.

Kérensky, who was then beginning to feel his weakness and was trying to cater to the most radical groups, instead of punishing or throwing into prison those who were fighting his régime, set them free and dismissed General Polovtsoff for his treatment of "citizens of the new Russia." After that, in Petrograd, the situation went from bad to worse, and the Government, ever weaker in the hands of the Bolsheviki, finally broke down and let this party take over the power.

Further south, in Kiev, where I spent part of the Summer of 1917, my husband was in command of the cavalry troops of the district. The situation there was very much the same. Cantacuzéne was constantly reporting the Bolshevik development and propaganda, raiding nests where foreigners were always found and captured, and where German propaganda sheets and German money continuously proved the origin and inspiration of a movement. However, in Kiev it was put on a different basis of argument from the line taken in the north. The movement there was called Ukrainian, and it was said national freedom should be gained from great Russia; a separatist movement was inaugurated which would have the same effect of breaking up resistance to the enemy, and weakening Russia's capacity for fight, without antagonizing the workmen of the province. Neither would this nationalist action bring into opposition the group of peasant proprietors, who in the south owned large holdings scattered among the estates of the nobility. The enemy realized a peasant landowner would not stand for any seizure of the land, except that of the nobility, and that workmen living in the better conditions of a gay, sunny, prosperous town where food was plentiful and life cost little, would not be moved by the same arguments as the workmen of the great factory districts of Petrograd. Their method was the same though, that of playing into German hands.

In Kiev all life and property grew less safe as time progressed. There was discontent created and a movement against the central provisional Government in Petrograd.

To the peasants in general it was preached that the land was theirs by right always, and now it was so by law. They should take it and divide it without waiting for the Constituent Assembly to pass on the measure. To the soldier on the firing-line it was preached that the German in the trench opposite was his brother and wished him well; that he also was discontented with his Government at home and with long fighting and that our men should fraternize with him. It was incidentally passed about, that it would be well if our soldiers went back to their villages to see whether their friends at home, in dividing up the land, did not take the best pieces for themselves, leaving nothing for the soldier who far away might be easily forgotten in the division of property. To the workman it was said the factories belonged to him as much as the land did to the peasantry, and that he was capable of running the machines as he was also the organization with which he had spent his life. It was added that he had been tyrannized over, deprived of his rightful ownership and at whatever cost he must now upset this order of things, and take hold of the factories' administration, or he would be lacking in civic courage; not doing his share in forming the new order of government. Naturally, all these people who could neither read nor write, had never thought before of either power or a duty in these matters, were pleased with such flattery as to their own capacities, and were impressed with a sense of their new duties. They became anxious to show what they could do. Some still held back in loyalty to men or groups who they felt had treated them kindly and been fair towards them always; but little by little all sense of obligation was demolished and our people were inspired with an immense desire to try in practice what in theory sounded so attractive. Gradually the whole country was being prepared for the Bolshevik régime. When the moment came for the overthrow of law and order, the poorer classes almost to a man had been converted either by fair words, or by bribe, or by vodka, to the firm belief that they were within their rights in opposing the whole order of life in Russia and in trying this new thing, which was to bring them the millennium. It appealed not only to their selfishness and desire for material gain and power, but also strongly to their ideals of justice towards the poor and the downtrodden. Equality to all, freedom and rest for those who were weary, peace and bread and

plenty to the world at large. They had been firmly convinced that after a period of chaos, they were to enter upon an era of prosperity unrivalled till now; and they were to go out soon and convert the whole world to their new religion, abolishing poverty and suffering among the Allies as well as among themselves.

When the Bolsheviki took over the power, for some time they still retained on paper and for use in propaganda, their eloquent theories of justice, truth and beauty—but almost immediately in practice they began to govern as they do today,—destruction, group by group, of everything that made for strength in Russia. First the nobility and the Government circles were made to suffer, and little by little capitalists, business men, the industrials and the shop keepers were sacrificed, together with all the intellectuals of the country. Schools were closed and business was shut down, food became scarce, there was no transportation; tyranny was intense, theft and murder were of constant occurrence, and the whole of Russia sank gradually into the mire, until it reached the low level of today. The people who had been at first led on by their ideals, were held by their self-interest and then debauched by an orgy of blood and alcohol offered to them; finally they were encouraged to believe themselves compromised to a point where return to other ways was impossible. Moral misery stood behind famine, with sickness and exploitation of every variety, until they were an inert mass to be moulded by the will of the tyrants to any deed the latter ordained.

When we left Kiev and went to Petrograd to try and organize our departure, I was surprised to find that while the Bolsheviki had thrown into prison the prominent revolutionaries and members of the provisional Government, they had withdrawn from their irons and given complete freedom such men of the old régime as had been most distinctly of the occult party at court. General Woyekoff, Protopokoff, Mme. Wiroboff, Sheglovitoff were all living at liberty, and they had had their fortunes restored to them. Sheglovitoff who had been the brains of the Rasputin party, was even asked to take a portfolio in the Lénine-Trotsky cabinet, while Mme. Wiroboff, the Empress's evil genius, was established in great luxury in an apartment and was a friend, it turned out, of Trotsky's. I was even told when we were trying to get our passports for abroad and were experiencing

endless difficulties, that if I wrote a note to this old court favorite, the problem would be solved, since her influence with Trotzky would smooth the way to our receiving the necessary papers. I hesitated to believe this until one day I met Mme. Wiroboff's mother on the street. I stopped to ask her how and where her daughter was, and the old lady said at once she was much better off now than she had been, that she had been liberated and was living at home again; that Mr. Trotzky had been so very kind! But we did not try to use this means to obtain our papers.

In these days, when everywhere pessimism, blame and accusation are rampant, the strength and beauty of the real Russian ways stand out with a great splendor; and to the American people who have always shown justice and mercy, the appeal of this fine dignity and silence should be great. Such are the people of Russia. I am proud to count myself one of them now, having seen and fully realized the quality and immensity of their greatness.

JULIA CANTACUZÉNE-SPERANSKY.